

(*Feda, sotto voce*—She can't do that.)

He [i.e. Raymond] wanted to know whether you could play Hulu—Honolulu.

Whether this comes from communication with Raymond, or from super-ESP, must remain unsettled. But that it is ESP of a sorts seems certain.

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AN OPEN CRITICISM OF THE MATERIALIST ATTITUDE

by F. SOMERVILLE ROBERTS

ABSTRACT

An assessment is made of the nature of sceptical attacks being made against parapsychology at the present time and a means of refuting them is suggested. The advantages to psychical research of such a step are discussed. The term 'paranormal' is used within the Society's definition.

There is no doubt that the sceptical approach to the paranormal is becoming more strident and hostile than in the earlier years of parapsychology. Whether or not this is due to the strengthening position of parapsychology, with evidence for its veracity constantly increasing as a result of experimental work or observation, there is no doubt that sceptical opinion is becoming almost desperate in its hostility. In many quarters, scepticism is becoming emotional and abusive, which are certainly not characteristic of a scientific approach.

This attitude has been well illustrated by Playfair in his paper "Mediawatch" in the April issue of the *Paranormal Review*. For example, he quotes Professor Richard Dawkins as being most aggressive in saying that "The paranormal is bunk and those who try to sell it to us are fakes and charlatans" and going on to say that demonstrations of psi on television are

"just conjuring tricks". It is almost as though Dawkins and his colleagues have to shout loudly and shrilly because they fear someone will produce evidence for the paranormal which they could never refute by scientific reasoning. This is supported by the fact that, when challenged to justify their claims, they so often retreat behind a smokescreen of incomprehensible verbiage, avoiding the questions asked and introducing totally irrelevant matters.

It is somewhat surprising that such opinions are granted the widespread publicity they receive. It may be that the response by parapsychologists has always been defensive and somewhat feeble because it is widely accepted that, in spite of the large volume of experimental evidence available, there is not a single repeatable experiment put forward as meeting the required conditions of being paranormal. This probably accounts for the fact that so many eminent scientists are unable to accept the present quality of evidence offered on behalf of paranormal phenomena. However sympathetic they may be to the views of most of the Society's members, it would not help them in any way to be associated with proclaimed fakes and charlatans.

The blame for this situation, to a large extent, rests with parapsychologists themselves. In general, they adopt the policy of experimenting only with phenomena which come within the popular concept of the paranormal, such as card guessing, telepathy, PK, etc., from which they try to infer the existence of a paranormal state. They tend to ignore those situations which fall within the definition of the paranormal and are fully repeatable and observable, but do not carry the attribute which is deemed to be a necessary characteristic of the paranormal, namely that its occurrence is transient or, as it is more commonly termed, 'spooky'.

If this position is rectified, and it easily can be, the situation is changed drastically. The parapsychologist is then no longer on the defensive; he is in a position to demonstrate a paranormal phenomenon as and when challenged and can dominate the debate. There are many phenomena falling within the definition of the paranormal which can be observed and adapted to experimental testing and it is a little puzzling as to why psychical researchers have not investigated such possibilities with the utmost vigour. Unless such phenomena can indisputably be shown to be purely physical, they must obviously be accepted as unassailable evidence of the existence of a paranormal state or function.

Several years ago it was suggested by Susan Blackmore that an investigation into the nature of consciousness could prove of considerable value to the study of parapsychology and there is much evidence to support this contention. Unfortunately, whilst much physiological work has been carried out on the relationship between conscious activity and its corresponding cerebral reaction, when it appears, these two factors are difficult to correlate in the same function, and very little further investigation is carried out to determine why cerebral activity cannot account for the corresponding conscious activity being observed. It is almost as though, for some reason, this was a forbidden area which investigators were reluctant to enter. The simple fact is that there are many forms of conscious activity which cannot be explained by any plausible physical theory and which therefore fall within the definition of the paranormal. There is little doubt that this area could reveal some very interesting

information on the nature of consciousness and, more importantly, on its apparently paranormal functions. Consideration of two or three examples will illustrate this situation.

Everybody experiences precisely the same present moment; *now* is the same experience to everybody, but Nature does not recognise any such event. There is no present moment in the physical world; it is a concept of each individual consciousness. This immediately presents the materialist with a situation for which there does not appear to be any physical explanation, nor does one appear possible. If the present moment is a simultaneous experience for all living humanity and is a result of individual cerebral activity, then it follows that cerebral behaviour in the area of the brain controlling time appreciation must be identical in everybody from birth to death. Given the known wide variations in those areas of the brain controlling physical activity, it would be impossible to claim that the local area associated with temporal activity is immune to such variation. It would require acceptance of an entirely new type of evolutionary process for which there is not the slightest evidence. Clearly, it is a phenomenon which cannot be explained on a physical basis.

A similar situation arises with universal perception, in which everybody, with unimpaired eyesight, irrespective of age, race, colour and sex, when looking at the same scene, sees exactly the same image. If this were not so, it would have been detected at the beginning of civilisation and life today would be virtually impossible. For the same reason that it is impossible to explain temporal appreciation on a physical basis, the fact that everybody sees the same image at precisely the same instant in spite of the normal variations in cerebral configuration again indicates a function which cannot be explained on a physical base and strongly indicates the existence of a non-physical element. The verifiable existence of such an element removes one of the main valid arguments of the sceptic, which is that, within our present knowledge of the physical universe, paranormal phenomena are impossible.

The apparently non-physical nature of this situation is confirmed by an associated phenomenon. If a group comprising, say, octogenarians and teenagers, again with unimpaired eyesight, are all asked to look at the same object and make a painting of it, they will all paint identical pictures. There is no characteristic in the paintings of one group which distinguishes it from the other. All dimensions and colours correspond and no group has wavy lines which the other draws as straight and so on. The only conclusion which can be drawn from this observation is that the way in which consciousness creates the images of visual perception does not deteriorate in any way between childhood and old age. If the function of image creation is cerebral, then the brain has an area which does not grow old with the passing of time, as does every organic function of the body. In order to justify his rejection of a nonphysical element, the sceptic has to put forward a plausible and acceptable theory to describe its working and the steps by which it evolved.

There are many other anomalies of consciousness supporting the concept of a non-physical element, such as the voluntary control of visual perception, as exemplified by the well-known phenomenon of auto-kinesis, but there is little point in discussing these in further detail. To describe as *bunk* apparently non-physical phenomena, which can be observed and repeated at will, and as

fakes and charlatans those who work in this field is, quite candidly, an insult to reputable scientists and reflects no credit on the sceptical organizations concerned. In addition, unless plausible physiological theories can be put forward to explain these phenomena, the opinions of such sceptics are utterly valueless and only bring ridicule on their proponents. The reply by sceptics to this situation is usually on the lines of 'We do not know the answers yet, but we will have them in due course', which is less an explanation than an admission of total ignorance.

The basic difficulty for the materialist is that, whilst there is no theory to explain these phenomena, the dualist simply says that consciousness is not merely cerebral activity in individuals but includes a mysterious element pervading all of space and he has numerous examples to which the theory can be readily applied. Of course, the mere mention of a *mysterious force* produces an immediate reaction of derision and hints at the occult from the sceptic, but this is just hypocrisy—if the description is applied to a known physical situation it is accepted without question. For example, when the noted science correspondent, Richard Matthews, says in the *New Scientist* (11th April 1998), "The expanding universe is in the grip of a mysterious anti-gravity force," there is no emotional response of any kind. Again, if parapsychologists claim that consciousness "is a bizarre mysterious theoretical force that pervades the whole of space" (ibid.), they are ridiculed, yet if the description is applied to the cosmological constant, the die-hard sceptics are not worried by *mysterious forces*.

There is no doubt that, although irrational claims are easily refuted, the constant sceptical pressure is having a damaging effect on the acceptance of the paranormal by orthodox science. This is somewhat ironic as just one scientific experiment of the appropriate type can change the situation completely. As already shown, there are many examples in this category. The main obstacle is the difficulty of obtaining publicity, for which the science journals are obviously necessary, but these appear reluctant to publish any paper on a subject rejected by well-known sceptics.

Probably the most effective way of dealing with this situation is for a number of the Society's eminent and influential academics collectively to approach the editor of a leading science journal and offer to submit a paper on the scientific aspects of parapsychology. This would be a most influential approach and obviously would carry immensely more weight than the opinions of a single writer.

It is clear that the publication of just one paper in this way would change the situation completely. It would set a precedent for co-operation between science and parapsychology, others would follow, there would be quotations and extracts in all sections of the media and, if all went well, we should not have to waste the time we do contesting the baseless claims of the sceptical school.

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